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Squeeveillance: Performing Cuteness to Normalise Surveillance Power

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Résumé de l'article

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Article | Squeeveillance: Performing Cuteness to Normalise Surveillance Power

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Abstract

Cute videos are everywhere online. Many of these videos increasingly come from footage taken by doorbell cameras. Amazon's Ring, and related connected camera devices, introduce new sociotechnical relations into domestic environments. First, I outline "squeeveillance" as the affective and performative dimensions of cuteness within surveillance. I explore the Ring surveillant assemblage and why it needs the power of cuteness. Then, I examine squeeveillance as the use of cuteness in the way Ring operates. I use the TV show *Ring Nation* (2022–present) to discuss the remediation of cute footage from doorbell cameras onto other media, before discussing the ways in which cuteness is performed as a normalisation of surveillance power. The article draws on theories of cuteness in conjunction with surveillance studies of power relations. In presenting squeeveillance as a lens through which to assess the expanding scope of Ring, I offer a discussion of the interconnected role of surveillance in contemporary domestic and media settings and its relation to current forms of power in surveillant assemblages.

Introduction

The rise in connected surveillance cameras in residential environments has led to an increase in cultural practices of "cute" surveillance, which I call here "squeeveillance." From mountain lions strolling through front yards, to delivery drivers responding to holiday treats, to children's costumes on Halloween, surveillance escalates quickly amidst the mediatisation of domestic environments, often funnelling data towards corporations and law enforcement in the process. These practices are rapidly normalised across camera devices, neighbourhood watch apps, domestic drones, online platforms, and even robotics, smart cities, and holiday elves. This paper starts from an examination of devices, structures, and narratives that bridge police and civilian surveillance. Theories of the affective role of cuteness are brought into discussion with the way power is performatively constituted to frame an analysis of how squeeveillance practices support the escalation of harmful surveillance norms in service of market and informational power. The paper examines the divisive and marginalising narratives of race, class, gender, and other forms of injustice extant in the cultures Ring perpetuates. *Ring Nation* is focused on as a remediation of Ring footage, situating the discussion within histories and cultures of reality television. The article argues that cute surveillance forces us to complicitly bear witness to social injustice.

Squeeveillance: Theorising Cute Surveillance

Squeeveillance is at once many things. It is the gesture of squeeing at the results of surveillance, providing the expected affective response to the mediatised videos of animals or humans in cute scenarios, eliding the act of surveillance that is taking place. It is the performative act of squeeing as acceptance of surveillance

systems, constituting legitimacy for devices and the systems in which they are embedded by connecting them with the expected affective response. Performing power here is understood in terms of the performativity that Judith Butler (1990, 2015) applied to gender roles, and has since been turned to a variety of socially constructed norms and power relations including trust in technology discourses (Benjamin 2023). This conceptualisation of performativity is a relation between individual acts that constitute identities and roles, which in iteration constitute wider social norms, and those ongoing social norms that structure the same acts through which they are constituted. Performing here is not an individual act but a connected and iterative process between the individual and the social structures in which they exist. Cuteness, as described by Ngai (2015) and others, demonstrates performative qualities. It is something done to an object, a role imposed by speech acts labelling the object as cute. The squee is a key aspect of this performativity, assigning the category of cute. It is also peri-performative (Sedgewick 2003) insofar as it is a speech act (the squee) about another act (the acts of the cute object itself). This carries over to squeeveillance, where the act itself is subsumed within its remediation by the surveillance act, which does the assigning of the role of cute.

It is also the curation of that affective response and the performed reaction that follows by forcing the audience to bear witness to the cute act in a way that not only expects but also enforces complicity. It is also a marketing ploy to sell more devices, a new form of media content to entice more audiences, a luxury item to be owned or watched vicariously, and a public relations stunt to evade questions of surveillance power that emerge when connected video doorbells are placed on homes next to schools, parks, the public space of the street, or the private space into which certain individuals are forced to enter. Between these different formulations, it is a gesture of privilege and power that places different groups as creator, audience, or subject, generating the specific roles in ways that perpetuate existing injustices of surveillance practices. In this way, squeeveillance exploits cuteness in the normalisation of surveillance power.

Cuteness is a "powerful affective register" that has seen a huge rise over the past couple of decades, carrying with it political, especially gendered, importance, including both a coping strategy and a power asymmetry between the experiencer and object of "cuteness" (Dale et al. 2017: 1–2). Even before its spread online, cuteness as a cultural phenomenon was "so commonplace that they have become the most invasive type of image possible" (Harris 1992: 177). Cute represents the "soft totalitarianism of the world of commercial culture" (Ranciere 2009: 105), an affective and aesthetic device that performs power asymmetries. Cute is concerned not only with the small, the feeble, but also the subordinate—it is the "aestheticization of powerlessness" (Ngai 2015: 53). Unlike the sublime, which renders the viewer powerless, it is the objectification of the cute object as powerless that provides the affective underpinning of cute. Cute is therefore less a quality of the object itself, instead being imposed on the object. it is the subject's affective experience of the cute object as cute, and as powerless. In this way cuteness is performatively constituted in the act of observation and the speech act of "squeeing."

The idea of cute surveillance, or "squeeveillance," builds on the concept of luxury surveillance outlined by Chris Gilliard and David Golumbia (2021). This framework highlights the ways that the same surveillance technologies that oppress marginalised groups are sold to the privileged as a luxury item. It exacerbates power asymmetries as a luxury: surveillance of the self becomes a benefit, a protection, rather than a means of control. This is echoed in the cultures that surround and enable these systems of surveillance power, with Gilliard and Golumbia (2021) highlighting the difference between the look of a FitBit and an ankle monitor that signify their different targets and whether they are a luxury consumer item or tool of oppression. Connected camera doorbells function in the same way. Repackaging a surveillance camera into a neat, small, stylised device converts it from a symbol of power to an icon of privilege. But that makes it no less oppressive.

Squeeveillance (surveillance using the affective power of cuteness), and the particular case of doorbell cameras such as Ring, exemplifies and extends the idea of luxury surveillance. Cute surveillance can

manifest as a luxury *device*, like Alexa for Kids styled as a tiger (4th gen) followed by an owl or dragon with nest/egg accessories (5th gen). However, cute surveillance is also about *access* (to footage), being able to view cute videos even to the extent of others placing monetary value on them (matt 2021), or the laying of cute traps to provoke others into contributing to cute footage (ABC News 2020). The opposing meanings of surveillance are embodied within each individual device or account: the user gains the apparent benefits of self-surveillance while also benefiting from the luxury of viewing the surveillance footage of others. This complicates data relations with Ring as a platform. The data goes beyond the personal data of a device owner into the non-consensual data collection of others. The device owner is demanding others—like delivery drivers—appear on their camera as a further part of the luxury lifestyle. The repurposing of "cute" Ring footage, to view or to share for likes on social media, is in some ways a facet of luxury surveillance— it embodies the privilege of surveilling one's own property as well as the workers forced to enter it. The forced performances and affective labour extracted from such workers adds to this privilege.

Like luxury, and against data-veillance, sousveillance, and other -veillances (Mann 2017; Munir and Jami 2019), it emphasises the affective relationship between the user and an implied audience as a support for the ideological power relationship of the user/subject to the technology/system. This relational element adds additional complexities to the power structures at work, as the user/subject gains affective and attentional power over the object of the surveillance. Squeeveillance, like luxury surveillance, operates a specific form of normalisation. But unlike luxury surveillance, which places surveillance technologies as an exclusive commodity—visible but inaccessible to most—squeeveillance explicitly engages with a much wider audience who are made complicit in the viewing of the products of surveillance.

Cuteness is an intensification or redoubling of consumer/commodity fetishism (Ngai 2015: 62), and squeeveillance is, therefore, in some ways an intensification of luxury surveillance. But just as cuteness is separated from beauty in part by its lack of claims to singularity (Ngai 2015: 54), so too does cute surveillance extend beyond the commodity fetishism of luxury surveillance, intensifying its fetishism by inserting new forms of affective value in its new "use" as endlessly consumed media for much wider audiences. Importantly, where luxury surveillance is about devices to self-surveille, cute surveillance is about surveilling others, intensifying and domesticating wider asymmetric surveillant assemblages.

The legitimacy of this unequal watching requires an audience peri-performatively forced to bear witness (Sedgewick 2003) to the cuteness. This is what separates squeeveillance from domesticated surveillance and moves it also into mediatised surveillance. In this way, squeeveillance normalises the acceptance of domestic surveillance precisely by taking it out of the home. The reputational value of squeeveillance is not based on the commodity value of the technology or the status value of the protection it offers. It is based on social, attentional, and media value in its transmission out of surveillance into other media. Lori Merish (1996) describes cuteness as the domestication of Otherness, simultaneously affirming and denying it, that must be "compulsively rehearsed," which I align here with being performed across multiple contexts in order to normalise the domestication of surveillance. It at once brings the Otherness of the external object of surveillance into domestication through objectification and ownership, and Others the domestic in its mediatised spread across global platforms. All the while, it denies the Otherness of the surveillant assemblages inserted into the domestic environment. Cuteness frames domestic surveillance in its performance in wider media settings, drawing in alternative audiences to legitimise its spread throughout homes and neighbourhoods.

The individuals posting their videos, Ring promoting them, the collating and re-mediatising in the *Ring Nation* TV show, and the online and television viewers watching, liking, and sharing them are all embroiled in this layer of mediatised complicity in Ring as an example of what Haggerty and Ericson (2000) call "surveillant assemblages." In such assemblages, fragments of bodies are datafied, decontextualised, and distributed to alternative contexts. The Ring assemblage performs this function of shifting footage between

domestic, police, and media environments. Cuteness has become an important cultural language through which this assemblage is normalised and its power performed.

Ring Surveillant Assemblages and the Need for Cuteness

In sociotechnical terms, the Ring system itself has been described by the Electronic Frontieres Foundation (EFF) as a "perfect storm of privacy threats" (Guariglia 2019). The combination of individual (user), private (Ring/Amazon) and state (police) use of data is supported by favourable media and a leveraging of political and community fears about crime. This all occurs with little oversight, using the regulatory loopholes of law enforcement to cover over the private exploitation of user data and the footage of anyone who walks past.

Lauren Bridges (2021) pulls on the strings of the Ring surveillant assemblage to highlight the ways Ring blurs the line between police and civilian surveillance. The embedding of these assemblages into domestic environments creates new forms of infrastructural power through "discourses and fixtures" (Bridges 2021). It is not only the devices, nor the elaborate and obfuscated data ecosystems behind them, that construct this power. It is also the cultures of surveillance, the narratives that are performed around and through Ring, that support the spread of this power. The new cultural practices that emerge through the luxury devices generate exemplify the culture of "watching as a way of life" (Lyon 2016), the legitimisation of constant surveillance of others through cultural forms like social media. But it goes further, with watching becoming a life*style*, a branded luxury commodity. The power of Ring, therefore, exists beyond individual cameras in surveillant assemblages supported by discursive shifts, of which cute videos are a key component.

The embedding of this surveillant assemblage of infrastructural power into neighbourhoods across the world, and particularly the way it links up with other Amazon devices/systems like the Alexa assistant, has been described by David Murakami Wood and Valerie Steeves (2021: 150) as "vectors of infection" or "mould spores" that "join up with other points of infection" between devices, data systems, and external actors. The fact that this enables the police to access private property that would otherwise be difficult to gain entry, and the connecting of different devices within a neighbourhood mesh network, creates "a full-blown infestation" (Murakami Wood and Steeves 2021: 150). And it is an infestation that is performative, creating its own sense of security even as it fails. Indeed, Ring camera owners are more likely to be victims of crime (Frascella 2021) and end up even *feeling* less secure (Gilliard and Golumbia 2021). It is here where discourses step in to cover over this gap, to perform the devices' value. I argue that cuteness is a key part of this performance.

Part of this performance is concealing the motives of Ring users from themselves (Horning 2020). This uses individualistic narratives to displace the wider societal threats of this kind of surveillance onto others while focusing on the apparent personal nature of such devices. So, it is not only that "doorbell cameras constitute the enclosure of neighborhoods" (Horning 2020) in terms of excluding othered groups from the geographical space of the community. As assemblages such as Ring exclude outsiders from physical spaces, they attempt a discursive enclosure of the device within its physical presence. This separation of the particular Ring from its sprawling surveillant assemblage is part of the performative denial of the impact of such devices beyond their immediate vicinity. This requires a series of performative gestures that constructs an alternative narrative, labelling the footage not as surveillance but as "whimsical" (Herrman 2020), as fun, as cute.

The enclosure effects occur as the assemblage transitions to the collective. The linking of Ring users through the Neighbours app makes the imagined community into a more tangible set of people. The luxury item of the devices constitutes a sense of the right kind of people. In many ways, this is inseparable from a perception of affluence, decency, and other exclusionary narratives. It therefore reaffirms class and race-based enclosures and exclusions. The supposedly personal footage becomes shared within this exclusive group, leaking out and undermining the justification through collective fear. Apps such as these—like the similar Nextdoor system that offers the community reporting element without the automatic Ring

connectivity—generate what Rahim Kurwa (2019) calls a "digitally gated community." This gating through Ring and Neighbours operates as a social network, "a digital community of like-minded users" (Kurwa 2019: 115). The additional risks of Ring connecting with the police and further technologies (facial recognition, for example) go beyond the Nextdoor app. Racial profiling and class gatekeeping become an ingrained part of the assemblage and the business model.

The establishment of Ring not only as a device but also as infrastructural power is seen in this platform element. This extends to the Neighbours app, facilitating community (and collective fears) through the platform, as well as into Ring Protect. The default mode of the Ring device is to provide remote access to live camera footage. It is aimed at answering the door from another location and monitoring when motion is triggered, as well as other similar modes of interaction. But Ring Protect offers the ability to save recordings. I will discuss below the implications of this form of watching, but in terms of the business model, as Emily West (2019: 29) describes, "Amazon is not just selling products that provide surveillance but also selling it 'as-a-service'—a broader trend in the digital economy." West (2019) argues that the ever-widening array of home surveillance tools and connectivity that Amazon provides is, in turn, part of generating feelings of security in relation to Amazon's original core business of home delivery.

The need for cuteness by Ring is also to cover over the myriad other issues the devices have created. On a physical level, there have been issues of Ring devices catching fire if the incorrect screw is used (BBC 2020c), while on a systems level there have been widespread instances of hacking and tools to enable this (Cox and Cole 2019). This level of vulnerability goes completely against the function and feeling that Ring is attempting to create for its users. The inverse function shows how hacked Ring cameras can let potential burglars know when a house is empty, further contributing to the device making a home *less* secure. The inverse feeling is seen in the affective dimension of device hacking. For example, in a three-year-old being offered ice cream through a Ring camera. This is compounded by the prominent role of social media in sharing the video of the incident. Indeed, within two paragraphs, one article mentioned how many views and comments the parent's post about it received on TikTok (Morris 2022). Similarly disturbing occurrences have been widely reported, particularly when parents place cameras in their children's bedrooms (Cox and Cole 2019). What is designed to construct a feeling of safety instead exposes the vulnerable and undermines its own affective intentions. This inverse affect is made worse by other glitches, like "phantom chimes" causing alarm and feelings of insecurity by device owners who see the doorbell ring but nobody there (BBC 2020b). And this affective dilemma is also felt by law enforcement, with the hacked BlueLeaks documents showing fears among US law enforcement (including the FBI) that owners were using doorbell cameras to monitor police presence and alert one another (BBC 2020a).

While Ring dominates the doorbell camera market, it is far from the only maker of such devices. So, Amazon is also beholden to the potential reputational harm of similar products and the issues they may create in the public discourse around home cameras. For example, Wyze kept secret for three years an unpatched vulnerability in their cameras, even though it was responsibly disclosed by online security company Bitdefender (Hollister 2022). Related apps also have problems, like reporting on the Citizen app that suggested even happy videos are creepy (Baker 2021). For example, one instance of the app sharing how a missing child was returned home safely ended up being less of a heartwarming tale and more a mediatised advert for the app's role. Ring's aggressive use of, on one hand, cuteness and, on the other hand, close links to police are attempts to assuage the potential public mistrust that emerges from these devices more generally. A prolonged monopoly on the market requires a similar monopoly on the narratives and discourses that surround these devices. Skirting the issues of surveillance, of a false sense of security, cuteness steps in to cover over the cracks and push the message that Ring is there for you.

Squeeveillance in Ring Assemblages

How, then, does cute operate within the Ring surveillant assemblage? The highly mediatised presence of cute Ring videos, especially those of animals, is arguably more effective than its role as an anti-crime device (Farivar 2020). We already know that "the internet is full of cats," and pets or animals more generally hold a particular level of visibility and sociocultural function online (see, for example, Maddox 2022). What I call squeeveillance appropriates this already-normalised cultural trend to normalise surveillance practices (and the embedding of devices into greater physical spaces).

The spread of cute videos on platforms like Youtube shows animals that "accept the role of subject without protest; they perform cuteness without resistance" (O'Meara 2014). The expectation, then, is that humans will do the same, and the cuteness becomes an integral part of viewers' complicity in "facilitating their own surveillance... with the gleeful abandon of a kitten jumping in a tissue box" (O'Meara 2014). This is seen further in social media pet accounts, in which human users perform the role of surveilled pet (Ngai 2022). As posters and viewers are drawn into the affective and relational rewards of cuteness, they are also drawn into accepting the assemblages of surveillance. Cuteness slides onto surveillance technologies in ways that unproblematically integrate them into our media landscapes. But this returns to the point about surveillance footage as a luxury, for it is not viewed equally.

Rukmini Pande's (2018) study of fandoms shows how certain groups—especially black individuals, queer individuals, and women—are forced to "squee from the margins." The power structures of visibility and invisibility build on whiteness as the foundation of cultural systems in which the taboo and the monstrous (for Pande [2018], a range of topics like cannibalism within fiction, but here surveillance technologies) are acceptable within certain framings. The aestheticisation of this monstrosity through cuteness makes squeeveillance acceptable in white middle-class framings while concealing its monstrous application to marginalised groups. The viral celebrity and widespread role of animal interruptions in pandemic live videos demonstrate the extraction of care from animals, mediated through their appearance on screen in unexpected ways (McIntyre, Negra, and O'Leary 2021). A rupture of squee emerged as a coping mechanism for forced home surveillance, but it also momentarily displaced the viewer into a position of performed power rather than subjectivation. Squeeveillance complicates our relation to surveillance by constantly reframing roles, affects and power structures.

Ring mobilises mechanisms of cuteness to make domestic surveillance acceptable, at least within the framing of its target consumers. Ring itself operates accounts across various social media platforms (Ring n.d.). These perform the role of corporate social media presence and advertising, but they also include the sharing of user-generated content from Ring cameras, particularly cute videos. However, much of Ring's work is done for them by users posting and sharing across different platforms. This includes videos of pets (Lauren 2023), as well as the particular case of pets interacting with the doorbell itself (Ring 2020). Wild animals are also shown ringing the doorbell (Arizonas Family 2024; Goodfriend 2019; Rier 2022), further performing the cute acceptability of the surveillant assemblage by making animals unwittingly engage directly with their own surveillance (a reflection perhaps of common ways humans interact with such assemblages). Sometimes, especially in reference to wild animals that could otherwise be dangerous, it is the mediatisation that assigns the value of cuteness, particularly from viewers far removed from the realities of the boundaries between animal and human habitats (Ring 2022). The way cuteness slides from wild animals seen as simply "out there," to domestic animals and an assumption of ownership, to one's own children, with a more complex relationship of care (or lack thereof) and implied ownership, flattens these differences and transposes onto the treatment of other people (such as delivery workers) in ways that are fundamentally dehumanising. Cuteness is an affective relation done *to* the animal, as it is with the cute child or kitsch object. It reduces wildness into domesticity through cuteness. This domestication effect on wild animals, drawn not only into domestic environments but also into domestic surveillance, is remediatised through squeeveillant assemblages. There are also performances of affective responses to cuteness that

highlight the interactions between different media.[1] These are even remediated into regular news sites (Boyle 2021). Other examples of animals also lean on human projections onto animals, like the affection for and affectionate frustration with children (Ring 2023a).

Family, particularly children, are also used to mobilise cuteness. This could be small moments of everyday domestic life, like a child wanting to help their parent bring in the wheelie bin (Rees 2022). It is also commonly shared when there is distance between family members, like a parent being away and a child talking to them through the Ring doorbell (Ring 2023b). As the lifestyle that Ring fits into means both parents in all likelihood have their own devices (and the one who is away needs one to access the live footage), the use of Ring becomes a performance of cuteness as well as a performance of self-surveillance as an acceptable means of mediating relationships. This also plays into related narratives such as national identity and the military with children leaving messages for parents on deployment (Ring 2023c). Such uses connect the state/military frameworks of surveillance with family life in ways that conceal the power structures at work. Entire families are made submissive in the wake of monstrous systems of power repackaged as cuteness. Even inverse cuteness plays a role in the performance, with "terrifying" videos themselves rendered cute.[2] The construction of cuteness is "closely linked to the grotesque, the malformed.... [T]he element of the grotesque in cuteness is perfectly deliberate" (Harris 1992: 178). Monstrosity is part of the package, and the monstrous image is made cute in order to perform the same transformation onto the monstrous systems of surveillance themselves. The combination of cuteness, performativity, and surveillance is what generates squeeveillance as a legitimising and normalising power.

Ring Nation

I would like to turn now to a particular example of the mediatisation of the Ring squeeveillant assemblage by focusing on the *Ring Nation* (2022–present) TV show and YouTube channel. *Ring Nation* presents footage from Ring cameras and related doorbell or mobile cameras in the style of reality or home video television shows. It frames this as "your daily dose of viral videos from neighborhoods coast-to-coast shared by you, the Ring Nation community!" and is accompanied by commentary from Wanda Sykes and others. The show is produced and distributed by companies owned by Amazon and operates as an extended advert for Ring systems. It is syndicated to local networks across the US and transposed back onto social media via YouTube (although this account has since had all content removed). The launch of the show was met with much criticism, including a petition and in-person protest by the MediaJustice network and others, and US Senator Ed Markey stated that "this is no *America's Funniest Home Videos*—Amazon appears to be producing an outright advertisement for its own Ring products and masking it as entertainment" (Markey qtd. in Baum 2022). The placement of Wanda Sykes as the lead presenter attempts to leverage her status as a comedian, as well as her position as a queer black woman and activist, ignoring her own history working for a government surveillance agency. Meanwhile, being broadcast on cable TV channels in thirty-five states targets a mainly older, white audience that makes up a likely market for Ring devices.

Chris Gilliard (2020) notes how RingTV, *Ring Nation*'s online predecessor, employs an "interspersing of cuddly family-friendly videos next to anxiety-inducing footage [that] helps to establish Ring as a friend, there to show you good times, and to keep you safe during the bad." The juxtaposition of the Ring's primary function and its incidental (or staged) cuteness performs the covering over of its monstrosity and its ineffectiveness by engineering an affect of squee. *Ring Nation* forgoes the direct anti-crime footage to focus on cute and humorous videos, further removing the device from its intended function and major consequences. Of particular interest are not just the videos portrayed as funny but also the ones involving animals (and humans) that lean on the performance of cuteness to justify Ring surveillance.

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[1] Such as posting about interrupting a stream to respond to the lost animal that appeared on the Ring (Sara 2022) or the interruption of a newscast with a Ring alert about the owners' pet (Wade 2021).
[2] Such as the presentation of a bug on the lens (Badly-drawn bee 2021).

For a long time, the only access to surveillance (e.g., CCTV) footage most people had was through reality TV. Reality TV itself is formed around a paradox, "the simultaneous loss of faith in photographical images and the proliferation of reality TV and visual evidence" (Fetveit 1999: 797). Reality TV is an "experiment in surveillance" (Bell 2009), and within this format the CCTV style of *Big Brother* (2000–present) and related shows "appears to simply calibrate visual perception; it is operated by a machine, and no human mediation is involved in its production of 'pure' evidence" (Dovey 2001: 136). The device and its obscured assemblage appears to take on the mediating role, despite the careful curation by human producers. But reality TV of this style also shapes the way viewers experience and understand the logics of surveillance (Bell 2009). It is notable that this experience and understanding is from the perspective of viewer, rather than victim. It spans individual and social anxieties, covering them over with complicity and engineered affective responses.

The placing of *Ring Nation* onto local television channels shows how "more widespread and older technologies—like television—may work in distinct ways with new reality show formats to feed into both public and internalized forms of surveillance and control" (Abu-Laban 2015: 48). This particular media relation is extended beyond funny home video styles, beyond *Big Brother*-style engineering, and into a relation with the viewer as producer. The Ring doorbell occupies a similar role in the mediatisation of surveillance cameras to webcams, which Hille Koskela (2004: 200) describes as "of a different order.... [M]any of them are institutional and commercial, but there is a huge amount of webcams installed by individuals, for other individuals, without any commercial tone." Of course, Ring as part of a highly corporate network performs this aesthetic while asserting the private control of the system. It is Amazon in control from start to finish, from device to delivery to storage to TV show.

The normalisation of Ring devices through *Ring Nation* extends beyond even the corporate framing. It also leans on the reality TV focus on policing in order to justify the device's role in security and its links with law enforcement. Nic Groombridge (2002: 43) describes CCTV as "both crime control and crime culture TV and neither of those things." This is particularly evident in *Ring Nation*'s production company Big Fish Entertainment, who had previously worked on *Live PD* (2016–2020), which combined online live streaming formats with police reality TV. From the late 1980s, there was a shift in the visibility of policing within the community through reality TV shows like *Cops* (1989–1994), as well as the counter strand in the early 1990s, with the filming of police violence against Rodney King and others highlighting an oppositional framing of the visibility of the police (Brucato 2015: 456). Ring and other online media shift this back to invisibility, as it is individuals and the private domestic infrastructure that are doing the policing themselves. The police are rarely, if ever, seen on *Ring Nation*, and it avoids the dashcam format familiar to car chase footage or the documentary style of having a film crew follow police officers. Using incidental footage taken by Ring devices draws the gaze of the surveillance assemblage into the landscape of the domestic environment, more like the *Big Brother* house embedded into streets across the US. In this way, just as Ring and similar systems are policing without police, so too is *Ring Nation* a police reality TV show without the police.

Examples from *Ring Nation* highlight this mediatised relationship performed through cuteness in ways that reveal underlying injustices of race, class, and gender. In one video, the presenters add commentary by putting voices to animals, not only trivialising potential sexual violence and performing group prejudice through implied racism and/or classism but also making cute the constant surveillance of all who walk past. Another features the commentary, "We had a porch robber. But that porch robber was a bear taking away the box." Yet another is titled "there goes the Neigh-Bear-Hood" and the section subtitled "Bad Neigh-Bear" describes bear damage as "terrorising the neighbourhood" and "vandalising," thus normalising prejudice with cute animals. Ring footage of animals is framed in the same discourse as prejudiced reasons for using the cameras. Cute version of surveillance normalises it, conceals power asymmetries, and makes it more acceptable to use on people.

Further examples more directly perform the role of the Ring device itself. A squirrel breaking into a parcel left on a doorstep directly plays off a cute animal interaction to legitimise the original parcel-delivery monitoring function of Ring. Meanwhile the commentary references crime—"strictly speaking we are witnessing a federal crime here"—and attempts to add humour to describe the animal as a criminal by leveraging class/race-based assumptions: "it's not going to be so cute when it comes back all emboldened and steals your car." Another clip goes beyond being an advert for Ring ("Ring.com" is displayed clearly in the corner of the screen) and actively tries to normalise this discourse. Commentary saying that "this bobcat is legitimately casing the joint [...]. If only it noticed the home camera filming its every move" extends the framing out of home videos into a displaced replaying of real crime/police shows.

Given Ring's longstanding relationship with law enforcement, the "cop in your neighbor's doorbell" (Calacci, Shen, and Pentland 2022) demonstrates the simultaneous ubiquity of social media and surveillance platforms. Calacci, Shen, and Pentland's (2022) study showed evidence of racialised posting rates and racialised labelling of footage (as a crime) that combines spatial gatekeeping with law enforcement access. This demonstrates the way that cuteness is at once endearing, subordinate, and unthreatening, as well as filled not with disgust but with pity and contempt (Miller 1998: 32). Or, as Frances Richard (2001: 95) describes, "Cute displaces and protects against violence by caricaturing the object of potential violence." Through these *Ring Nation* examples, animals stand in for groups excluded from Ring neighbourhoods, while their cuteness is employed to performatively make this discriminatory fear-mongering acceptable and support the narrative that a Ring device makes its owner (feel) safer.

The wrapping of racialised crime discourse in product advertising demonstrates the private control over this squeeveillant assemblage. This extends into other portrayals of cuteness. For example, an eight-year-old supposedly requested their family get a Ring doorbell so that they could chat to a parent who is away a lot. The framing—or staging—of this affective justification for the device further expresses the examples discussed above that market Ring as a device not only for family security but also family relationships. Whether the excerpt is genuine or staged is open to debate, but it demonstrates the way "the 'reality' of a videotape—a surveillance camera tape—is a social product rather than a mere description" (Koskela 2003: 304). This embodies the performative function of surveillance as *creating* knowledge rather than *finding* it (Allen 1994: 144). And it is created in the interests of its corporate masters. The balance of power shifts from state surveillance to corporate surveillance—or at least corporate-mediated self-surveillance. It shows how "cameras run by private market forces outnumber those used by the authorities" and how "the authorities actually have very little control on how and where surveillance is used" (Koskela 2003: 302). And all this is in service of Amazon's broader monopoly on data and domestic systems.

Ring Nation feeds directly into this by highlighting delivery drivers on the show. One clip labels delivery drivers as "a beloved part of any community," showing one untangling a US flag hanging from the porch and another dancing, before linking back to a squirrel raiding a package, justifying Amazon's monitoring of all aspects of the process. But the using of drivers for media kicks and clicks returns in another clip making fun of a delivery driver tripping over a porch, further trivialising the working conditions of Amazon employees. The wider assemblage of Ring is also brought into the spotlight, with frequent references to neighbours emphasising the Neighbours app. One video advertises that "Today is Good Neighbour Day. Nobody has better neighbours than we do here in the *Ring Nation* community." It shows people fixing broken flags (again evoking a link to state legitimacy and signifiers of insular identities) or even someone tackling a holiday decoration on fire. Each part of the system is made complicit in justifying the other parts of the surveillant assemblage, performing these relations as a cute community rather than a network of power. All the while, the surveillant gaze remains still, appearing as a passive observer of things going on outside rather than actively surveilling not just the domestic environment but also the world outside.

Performing Cuteness as Performing Surveillance as Performing Power

Evan Selinger and Darrin Durant (2022: 92, 100) describe Ring "a slippery slope service" in which "the very classification of 'consumer technology' strip[s] artifacts and systems of their political, world-shaping dimensions" through a form of "affect engineering [that] encourages consumers to adopt a presentist mindset." Their argument is that the instant, feel-good nature of security prevents users from thinking about the future implications of the technology if its use was normalised to the point of ubiquity (Selinger and Durant 2022). I would extend this along two lines: (1) it is also the present social issues that are being obscured; and (2) the affect engineering relies not only on feelings of safety but also of cuteness. While Ring as a tool of paranoia that only increases paranoia—by making its users *less secure* functionally (Frascella 2021) and affectively (Gilliard and Golumbia 2021)—might work as a marketing strategy feeding off the fear of its customers, considering its squeeveillant nature adds to critical discussions of Ring by showing how non-customers are brought into the affect engineering through the performance of cuteness. Squeeveillance steps in to perform the absent sense of safety with the comfort of cuteness. In this way, Ring is already operating as a contagion (Murakami Wood and Steeves 2021), engineering a blinkering of concrete inequalities and the accumulation of power with a mass squee of approval.

The Data and Society report "At the Digital Doorstep" (Nguyen and Zelickson 2022) details how domestic cameras are used to manage delivery workers. Within a squeeveillant understanding, the treatment of humans in this way (akin to performing animals used for cute gifs) embodies the "dehumanising" quality of cuteness (Harris 2001: 7). A survey of delivery drivers concerning the pressures they are faced with showed that one in six (17.7%) reported being used for social media trends (Reinblatt 2022). The mediating lens of Ring, and the performance of cuteness, have shifted the focus of expectation from chance happenings of animals or family members to the manufactured performances of already-marginalised workers. As one reporter wrote in response to a trend on TikTok that showed delivery drivers dancing on request, "just because Amazon forgets its workers are people doesn't mean consumers should" (McMenamin 2022). Ring even replied to one such viral post "poppin' and lockin' while box droppin.'"[3] While this is perhaps not surprising from a company known for its abusive employment of delivery drivers (Nguyen and Zelickson 2022), it speaks to a wider expectation of cute performance. Ring has appropriated online cute culture to engineer an acceptance and expectation of this dehumanising affective exploitation. It echoes the privileged framing of social media content seen in the "gifts for strangers" trend that has been described by Crystal Abidin as "ethically ambiguous" and often nonconsensual (Abidin qtd. in Cassidy 2022). These trends expose the oppressive gendered origins of cuteness and the racialised impact of surveillance, all packaged into an asymmetrical luxury: device owners gain the luxury of social media content while delivery drivers receive an extra expectation on their already highly monitored working environment.

As Torin Monahan (2015) points out, the scope of surveillance practices and technologies is potentially indiscriminate, but in reality, they are targeted against certain groups. Surveillance has a well-documented history of racist application, particularly in the US (see, for example, Browne 2015). Ring reiterates this racist/classist narrative by deciding who gets surveilled in the workplace. A precarious Amazon delivery driver is watched to make sure they do not steal or damage private property from the wealthy, while privileged white CEOs and politicians can get away with embezzling money from the vulnerable without anywhere near the same level of real-time scrutiny. The individualising nature of surveillance is asymmetric, giving power to individuals but treating its subjects as a mass of controlled bodies. This requires a collective vision of privacy to address, but squeeveillance and related narratives of surveillance perform divisions that equate a "digitally gated community" (Kurwa 2019) with an assemblage of separated individuals rather than a social call for justice. When Ring validates expectations that drivers perform for social media by not only sharing such content but also translating it back onto reality TV, the pressures increase on precarious, often racialised, workers balancing demands for "customer service niceties" with gruelling delivery targets and

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[3] Since removed, but documented by other users (Conrad 2022).

harsh conditions (Nguyen and Zelickson 2022). The cuteness of making a driver dance or perform gratitude for a holiday treat quickly fades when they are having to urinate in bottles as they have neither time nor opportunity to meet their own basic needs.

Domestic surveillance is "reframing the banality of technology in the home as the 'conspiracy of the mundane,' and positioning smart cameras as an intermediary between active and passive forms of filming" (Tan et al. 2022a: 19). A camera such as a Ring is "a perceptually powerful and spatially sensitive device that enables a variety of surveillant uses outside of basic home security," generating "power imbalances among primary and non-primary users" (Tan et al. 2022b: 1). A surveillant assemblage "transforms the purposes of surveillance and the hierarchies of surveillance" (Haggerty and Ericson 2000: 605). Cuteness is "the name of an encounter with difference—a perceived difference in the power of the subject and object, in particular" (Ngai 2015: 87). In the identification of the viewer of squeeveillance with the medium of the surveillant assemblage, it conceals the power the medium has over both object and subject. The viewer is forced to bear witness not only to the enforced performance of cuteness by the object of surveillance but also to their own complicity in legitimising the power of the surveillant assemblage.

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined the Ring doorbell camera as a surveillant assemblage mediated by performing the value of cuteness. From incidental videos of wild animals to staged family clips or manufactured performances by delivery drivers, cuteness makes surveillance more acceptable, easily shared on social media for views and likes. But it masks, legitimises, and normalises exploitative power relations that position surveillance not only as a luxury device or service but also as a luxury medium that draws users into a false sense of power. This is mobilised to cover over the ineffectiveness of Ring and similar devices in practice, and to fill in the affective gaps that feelings of safety cannot fully provide. Forcing new audiences to squee at surveillance footage helps the surveillant assemblage disappear into platform content and domestic infrastructure. This process performs the object of surveillance as cute, but in doing so also performatively constitutes an affective dimension of the surveillance system itself. The cop at the front door becomes obscured within a lovable record of animal antics, charming children, and dancing delivery drivers. I have labelled the use of cuteness to normalise surveillance in this way "squeeveillance."

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